GILLINGHAM HIGH STREET

PROPOSALS FOR REVIVAL

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GILLINGHAM HIGH STREET

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gillingham Town Centre is dying, with the imminent departure of the Cooperative Department Store and Littlewoods seemingly about the strike the death knell. But the Liberal Democrats believe the rot can be stopped and the High Street revived, but action has to be swift and positive.

This proposals recommended by this report are designed to stop further degeneration and create an infrastructure that will encourage traders and the public to come to Gillingham. Much of what is proposed could be implemented without delay and with an immediate result. The cost could be nearly £1 million in the first year, with maybe £650,000 a year thereafter – although there is plenty of evidence to suggest that actual costs would be much less and various funding sources already exist. Compared to investment in Chatham – and certainly in Medway overall, this is 'chicken feed'.

There are also proposals regarding traffic flow options, creating new accesses to the High Street, and devising schemes to develop specific areas. It's recognised these need specialist knowledge and proper investigation that the Council can provide, but the work should be focussed and most importantly, commence now.

2. BACKGROUND

Few town centres in Britain have escaped the effect of changed shopping habits over recent decades. Out-of-town business parks, shopping malls and more recently the growth of on-line retailing have created totally new shopping retail cultures that have left the established town centres empty of the department stores and popular retailers that once flourished. Many towns have successfully re-invented themselves whilst others have done little, hoping like Mr Micawber that 'something will turn up'. Sadly, Gillingham has been among the latter.

Gillingham is the youngest of the Medway's High Streets, little more than a century old and with no imposing or historic buildings. From the start, it was designed to serve the thousands living in the terraced homes in lower and mid-Gillingham – an area and customer base that still exists. Like most people these days, they will go out of town or on-line for occasional purchases of large or expensive items, but want local shops for their basic essentials.

The demise of Gillingham High Street has been gradual but in the past few years it has accelerated. Medway Unitary Authority has done little, preoccupied with Rochester - with its opportunities for generating prosperity from tourism; and with Chatham, a more established and larger retail centre with greater potential for development.

We know many people have expressed a hope that the High Street will somehow return to its former 'glory', but this is not going to happen. Shopping habits have changed dramatically, as is well understood by the major retailers, who have adapted, or are adapting to meet customer demands.

We believe there is a future for Gillingham High Street, but not as it was. Instead, it will hopefully continue to serve the everyday needs of the 30,000 residents who live within walking distance. At the same time it can attract visitors from outside the immediate area who seek an alternative to large out-of-town stores and malls, and want to experience personal service, the bustle of markets, and small specialist shops

The major High Street retailers will only be attracted to an area if it is going to be profitable for them, and that means adequate customers. Local authorities can only strive to create a suitable infrastructure that will attract visitors and generate maximum 'footfall'. This is the aim of our recommendations.

3. THE HIGH STREET

The High Street is effectively comprised of three sections:

- The short stretch between the Station and the present Co-operative Departmental Store, part of a one-way traffic 'loop', carrying the centre's through traffic to Jeffery Street. Narrow pavements combined with parking either side of the road hampers pedestrian access to the main section of the High Street.

- The main section located from the Co-operative Store to the Canterbury Street intersection is fully pedestrianised with access points at Green Street, Sappers Walk and Upper James Street.

- The pedestrian section continues past Canterbury Street until meeting Jeffery Street where the High Street continues to the Marlborough Road/Mill Road/Brompton Road junction

Whilst most retail outlets are located in the High Street, there are additional small units in Canterbury Street either side of the High Street junction, Green Street and Upper James Street

4. THE HIGH STREET FORUM

The 'Forum' should be the voice of the High Street, linking those running the shops, offices and restaurants with the Council and transport operators. Despite the best of intentions the forum has become unrepresentative and it's views are largely ignored.

We recommend the Forum be immediately re-constituted to include representatives:

- for the major retail outlets (that remain!)
- the smaller, individual shops
- restaurants, cafes, takeaways
- offices and other commercial organisations (banks, etc)
- the market
- public transport operators

together with Council representation to include:

- Town Centre Manager
- A Councillor representing each of the political parties
- Director of Community & Environment (reflecting the significance of the High Street)

The Forum should meet formally, at least monthly, and be open to the public who should be able to ask questions. They should be responsible for publicity and promotion of the High Street in conjunction with the Council's communications team and an adequate budget must made available,

5. GETTING THERE

5.1 Rail

The station is well-served by trains and was renovated two years ago. Sadly, it has been allowed to deteriorate and the kiosk has closed. Direct access to the High Street is hampered by the road across Victoria Bridge and into the one-way traffic 'loop'.

Alternative routes for traffic avoiding this obvious 'pinch-point' might be devised using Marlborough Road, Canterbury Street (although this could create a pedestrian barrier at the High Street Junction, or the Gillingham Road level crossing but none would be easy or provide an ideal solution. An easier option might be to construct a wide pedestrian underpass from the station into the High Street, making the forecourt part of a widened road over Victoria Bridge isolated from pedestrians. It's recognised that this will require substantial long-term evaluation and investment, but **we recommend that traffic planners commence work on this immediately**

5.2 Bus.

People in Medway are not 'bus orientated'. Whilst increased car ownership has undoubtedly contributed to this view, the failure of bus operators to provide services that are dependable in terms of frequency and route, and at reasonable fares, has probably been the major problem. It's not helpful that many routes terminate at a depot located half a mile from the High Street. Short-term solutions lay with the bus operators and **we recommend dialogue to consider and devise solutions** commence immediately between the council, bus operators, the Forum and representatives of the travelling public.

5.3 Car.

No matter the environmental pressures, for the present the car will remain the principle means of transport. Long-term solutions will hopefully include substantially more use of public transport with park'n'ride into the town centre. Even then, there will always be use of the car to collect large items from shops.

Short-term, many people visiting the High Street will come by car. In recent years, parking capacity has been seriously reduced, leaving Somerfield, Jeffery Street and Balmoral as the main parks, with Green Street, Marlborough Road, Balmoral Road, and Lock Street providing the majority of on-street parking spaces. None of these are presently set out to maximise capacity. All could be replaced by multi-storey and/or underground parks, but this would be a long term (and expensive) option. The Somerfield and Jeffery Street parks only require simple re-planning to maximise spaces and **we recommend their layouts be modified** immediately

There is scope for immediate and relatively inexpensive improvement to the Balmoral car park. The 'garden' of what was once Balmoral Gardens is no more – a few trees and a muddy grass patch. The trees might remain but we recommend the grassed area become car parking space, possibly using sunken sectional bricks that provide support for cars whilst retaining a grass surface. The children's play area similarly occupies a relatively large space and observations at varied times indicate that it could be reduced in size. We **recommend reduction of the play area and further, that the entire pay area is placed on a mezzanine to afford additional car parking space** below. It's **also recommended that the recycling bins be re-located** to the perimeter of the car park where they cannot provide a 'lurking place' for yobs, muggers and the like.

We have also considered options for providing parking in the presently pedestrianised section of the High Street from the Canterbury Street intersection to the junction with Jeffery Street. There is scope for a double row of 'chevron' bays with access preferably from the Jeffery Street junction although access to Canterbury Street might be possible. Some of these parking spaces (with others in the centre section of Marlborough Road) might be restricted to say, 30 minutes for persons using the public library. Costs for creating parking in this area could be minimal, but if extended up to the Canterbury Street intersection, market stall accommodation would be reduced. **We recommend a decision regarding options for this section of the High Street be tabled for early consideration** by the reconstituted Forum.

5.4 Parking Capacity

Present capacity:
Somerfield, Balmoral & Jeffery Street parks provide @ 350 spaces
On-street parking (roads as stated above) @ 180 spaces

Improving use of Balmoral park to increase capacity could provide an extra 118 spaces
Introducing parking spaces in the eastern High Street could provide at least 60 spaces

5.5 Parking Charges

As was clearly demonstrated at the Dockside Outlet Centre, car park charging can seriously affect retail business.

We recommend at all the above car parks, and for on-street parking in Green Street, Marlborough Road, the lower end of Balmoral Road, Lock Street and Mill Road: that parking charges be fixed at 10p an hour, with a 4 hour maximum stay

This should apply from Monday to Saturday between the hours of 9.30 am and 7 pm, to deter use by shop/office workers, commuters and residents. In some areas, recently introduced resident parking schemes have overlapped traditional parking areas used by shoppers and such anomalies must be rectified urgently.

6. PRE-REQUISITES FOR REVIVING THE HIGH STREET

6.1 SECURITY

It's a fact of modern life that many large stores now employ security guards to deter vandals and stop petty theft. Out-of-town shopping malls similarly employ security guards. Gillingham was the first of the Medway towns to install CCTV, although updating equipment requires urgent completion. However, CCTV is not the complete answer: all security must be visible and we believe a police presence is the best option, the numbers of officers on duty varying according to activity on the street. We **recommend deployment to the High Street of proper police officers** - not 'community safety teams' or 'wardens', but PCSO's or preferably, 'real' County Constabularly officers funded by the Council, Following consultation with the police and others we are reliably informed that 5 officers would provide adequate coverage to maintain the other requirement that will be essential to the future of the High Street – **zero tolerance.**

6.2 CLEAN UP

The High Street is full of old signs, posters and decorations. The adjoining streets and the car parks have 'corners' filled with fly-tipped rubbish and general debris. Arguments are frequent as to whose responsibility it, but all could easily be removed within a few days by a small 'hit-squad'. We **recommend immediate clearance**, and ongoing monitoring by the Forum and traders, to report any further dumping and prompt removal. Estate agents should be encouraged to remove obsolete signboards and the few empty properties should have covering boards painted.

Many shops have fascias that require at least a 'freshening up', or repair and repainting. For a small independent shop with relatively small turnover striving to improve, this may be impossible – and larger stores may similarly be unable to justify expenditure. We believe this 'chicken and egg' situation may be resolved by assistance from the Council and therefore **recommend grants of up to £2,000 per premise** to be available during the initial 2 years.

Chewing gum is a problem in many towns, but there has been little or no organised cleaning in Gillingham with the result that the pavements are peppered, and particularly in hot weather pedestrians 'stick' to the pavements. We **recommend an immediate 'gum bust'**, with the installation of gum-boards in selected places and subsequent cleaning of pavements on a weekly basis

Pigeons remain a pest with heavy droppings in some parts of the High Street. We **recommend installation and maintenance of pigeon deterrents**

6.3 CLEARING THE HIGH STREET

It was once considered the height of trendy street style to install large 'planters' with decorative trees and floral presentations. Then it was realised they provided fuel for vandalism at a convenient level, before becoming giant rubbish bins and targets for graffiti, and so they were removed – except in Gillingham High Street!

We **recommend the immediate removal of all planters and other obstructive street furniture**, with the few seats that presently exist relocated, possibly to the 'Smiths Square' area. Additional seating could also be provided in that area, supplemented by seating outside cafes to encourage people to stay longer in the High Street. As proposed in the recommendations regarding the market, this is to become a 'working' high street, not an empty seaside boulevard.

6.4 TOILETS

The present toilet facilities are appalling and require full refurbishment. The 24-hour 'superloo' is located close to a food outlet and despite the claimed cleanliness of such units, this is not always the case. It requires better servicing or maintenance, and if it cannot be improved it would seem better to remove it. The Sappers Walk toilets are the most recently built but vandalism and poor service (contracted out) has taken it's toll.

We **recommend refurbishment of all toilets and modification of that in Sappers walk to accommodate a permanent attendant,** directly employed by the Council.

7. THE MARKET

The market is undoubtedly the High Street's greatest asset and probably doubles the average footfall on the days it operates.

Evidence shows that it's badly managed, with little control over some stallholders. For some years the Council has contracted out the entire market operation and seem to have been unable to enforce the most basic regulation. Whilst the increased business the market brings to the High Street is welcomed by many shops, their relationship with the stalls is at times somewhat tenuous. Similarly, some stallholders deliberately erect physical barriers close to shops, restricting access. Some clothes stalls are particularly adept at 'spreading' their stalls to include much of the remaining public walkways – this is especially worrying for the fire and emergency services.

We **recommend that negotiations commence immediately to terminate the contract with the market operator, and that the Council recruit an experienced Market Superintendent**, to use the traditional title - although 'inspector' or 'manager' could be equally suitable. Most street markets in London, and in other towns still retain direct control of their markets with a 'Superintendent' providing firm and proper control of the stallholders, and the market layout, in addition to being a reference point for the public.

We **recommend that the layout of the market be significantly altered**, with the majority of stalls 'back to back' along the centre of the pedestrianised High Street. Each stall should not exceed an overall a depth of say, 4 metres to allow an adequate public walkway between the rows of stalls and the shops, each facing and complementing each other. Obviously there must be gaps for shoppers to access each side of the street and directly opposite a café, space might be allocated for the café to locate some tables and chairs to encourage refreshment 'al fresco'.

The matter of market days, start and finish times and content has been the subject of considerable debate. Many markets open early and are finished by lunchtime, some run until mid afternoon, some later. Increasingly, markets quickly clear by mid afternoon and subject to weather, local cafes spread out tables and chairs to extend the shoppers' visit to the street or square – following the continental tradition, where this arrangement

eases into the evening economy. We feel this is somewhat ambitious for the present but is not out of the question in due course.

In view of the market's success in attracting visitors, it would seem sensible to extend operation to at least 5 days a week, and introduce a flea market on Sundays - that which previously operated at Rochester is, we believe, still looking for a home. Boot Fairs were also considered but the area seems to be well catered already and we believe that the trading standards requirements and legal implications could create problems.

It's our **recommendation that the matter of market days and times – and options for a Sunday market should be among the initial items for determination by the reconstituted Forum.**

8. COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

The Somerfield car park is dark, depressing and perceived as 'threatening' by many users. We **recommend that the floor be painted in a lighter colour and the lighting improved**.

However, the walls need similarly to be made much lighter and brighter to reflect available light. We **recommend a community project** whereby local graffiti artists, some of whom are undoubtedly extremely talented, are recruited to work (perhaps for a nominal 'fee') with a professional artist to decorate the interior walls of the car park – possibly to a 'theme' with the only proviso being that light colours prevail.

Drab brick walls or the rear of timber poster boards surrounds the car parks in Jeffery Street. Both could be similarly decorated as a further community project. As mentioned previously, the boarding over empty shops might similarly be decorated

Should a late afternoon/early evening economy develop, consideration might be given to introducing occasional street entertainment combined with a music 'stage' in the middle of 'Smith Square' between Sappers Walk and Green Street

9. SOMERFIELD 'MALL'

This area is equally as depressing as the adjacent car park,

We **recommend the immediate removal of decorations left over from several Christmases past and that the walls be painted** (part of the community initiatives?) to brighten the area. It's also suggested one or two 'permanent' market stalls be located on the floor directly facing Somerfield's entrance.

Medium to longer term **we recommend the roof be removed** to lighten the entire area and escalators be installed – the sloping pavement type that accepts shopping trolleys. It would also be an advantage to make shop frontages 'live' instead of bricked walls as is presently the case in this mall.

10. THE APPROACH TO THE HIGH STREET

From the James Street car park, the various street parking areas (including the parking area that might be created in the western end of the High Street), and the Station, the approach to the High Street is fairly wide and open

The approach from Balmoral Car park is the opposite!

The limitations of the pedestrian bridge over the railway are just about acceptable (although it would be worth investigating possibilities with the rail operators for a wider, perhaps more attractive structure). Having crossed the bridge, the route options are through a dismal and depressing 'tunnel' into the exit queues at the Co-operative food store, or along an uneven track by the Salvation Army Citadel to join Green Street.
We consider this area has potential for considerable improvement, and the creation of a new approach to the High Street.

We **recommend the purchase of one of the properties adjoining the Co-operative food store with a view to its demolition and the creation of a walkway** from the railway pedestrian bridge into the High Street. If on the eastern side, it might also involve purchase or use of what is presently part of the Co-operative car park).

The current track alongside the Citadel also provides indirect access to the High Street. The northern side of this track offers a depressing rear view of High Street properties that could be hidden by the creation of small retail outlets (initially possibly only temporary stalls) that might be developed into a 'specialist' area of say, bric-a-brac or handicrafts. We **recommend the preparation of various schemes for the area** for further consideration.

Finally, we **recommend the installation of 'Gillingham High Street' or 'Welcome to Gillingham' signage** across the entire width of the High Street at each access point.

11. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS & COSTS

11.1 For Immediate Implementation

	Cost £000's			
	One-off Cost	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Reconstitute Forum and establish budget	-	50	50	50
Cost of free and revised parking charges*	-	265	265	265
Establish team of police officers	-	180	195	212
Remove obstructive street furniture	20	-	-	-
Clean up street	5	2	2	3
Grants for shops	-	100	100	-
Refurbish toilets and recruit attendant	30	15	14	15
End present market contract	10	-	-	-
Recruit Market Superintendent	2	25	26	28
Implement revised market layout	7	-	-	-
Community Project	-	50	50	50
Improvements to Somerfield car park	50	-	-	-
Improve Somerfield Mall	25	-	-	-
Install street access signage	20	-	-	-
TOTALS	160	687	702	623

Parking charges. *This is based on a worst-case scenario At 30p per hour, parking between 1000 hrs and 1800 hrs generates £2.40, or £14.40 during a 6-day week. 529 parking spaces over 52 weeks has the potential to generate £396,000. Hence a reduced charge of 10p hour will generate £265K less revenue. However, we believe the actual current revenue to be considerably less - probably around £250,000 pa, so the cost of reducing parking charges is more likely to be in the region of £160,000*

11.2 With immediate effect, officers to commence investigation of:

- Changes to Balmoral Car Park
- Somerfield Mall Improvements
- Creating new access to High Street from Balmoral Car Park
- Schemes for development of the area alongside the Salvation Army Citadel

With proposals to be submitted for consideration by Members within 6 months

12. FUNDING

It's interesting to compare investment in Chatham and Gillingham during the past year. Gillingham received £61,000 whilst nearly £1¾ million was invested in Chatham.

There are funding sources that could be made available. These include monies from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, revenue from the hire/lease of market pitches and various receipts from Section 106 Planning agreements. With regard to the latter, a 106 Agreement was signed between the Dockside Outlet Centre (within the 'Gillingham' boundary) and Medway Council to fund 'free' bus services between the centre and the railway stations. The services were discontinued through lack of demand, but the agreement remains valid and there seems no reason why it should not be transferred to help fund regeneration of Gillingham High Street

In addition, police officers are more effective and represent better value than 'community safety wardens' and part of the wardens' funding could be diverted accordingly.

ODPM funding has already been provided for Gillingham High Street, most allocated to refurbishment of the library and the creation of a 'one-stop' shop – which was decided and implemented without any public consultation. Part of the plans for using of the 'balance' of this funding bizarrely includes the installation of yet more concrete planters!

We have ignored all these possibilities in our cost assessment, as we have deliberately overstated present car parking revenue, with the result that the actual cost of our proposals would undoubtedly be less than stated.